

***Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres* by Olivia Turnbull.**

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In the aftermath of the December 2007 funding cuts by the Arts Council, Olivia Turnbull's *Bringing Down the House: The Crisis in Britain's Regional Theatres* is a well-timed investigation of public subsidy and how it has covertly shaped the national theatre landscape. Giving particular attention to regional theatre, Turnbull illustrates how competing demands and expectations from a number of directions have placed increasing pressure on regional theatres, resulting in many going dark for long periods or closing altogether. For example, she points out that in 1997, after eighteen years of Conservative rule - a period that she labels as 'the crisis' for the arts in general and regional theatre in particular - three quarters of provincial producing houses were facing imminent closure (13). Beyond the lamentable loss of these theatres themselves, Turnbull contends that the fabric of British theatre itself is at stake because regional theatre has traditionally been a 'forum for new and experimental dramatic ideas, a touchstone for local community access, education and entertainment, and as a training ground and employment industry for a large part of the country's theatre profession' (14). *Bringing Down the House* will undoubtedly prove a valuable companion for not only the study of regional theatre, but also more broadly for the analysis of the arts and their relationship with the public sphere.

At the heart of Turnbull's study is the claim that the fortunes of publically subsidised theatres have always existed on 'unsteady foundations,' which has consequently exposed such organisations to the faddish economic and political

environment, an environment that was to prove particularly brutal during the Margaret Thatcher and John Major governments (17). Part one examines these foundations, starting with the early years of public subvention and the hastily formed 1940s predecessor to the Arts Council, CEMA (the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts). The impact of CEMA's chair, the economist John Maynard Keynes, is given particular attention; Turnbull convincingly demonstrates how Keynes' conservative and paternalistic values were reflected in the policies of CEMA, and were then, in turn, transferred to the newly formed Arts Council. Perhaps most crucial was the centrality of London and the valorisation of elitist companies such as the Royal Opera House and Sadler's Wells. The legacy of such values is shown by Turnbull to have had much longevity and to have regularly threatened the survival of regional theatre.

The perennial lack of arts funding from central government is a persistent shadow cast over the national theatre scene in Turnbull's account, although for regional theatre she also emphasizes the impact of the exacting and often conflicting demands of 'plural funding,' a scheme where theatres are also supported by local organisations such as city councils or regional arts associations (47). Plural funding, Turnbull argues, forces regional theatres to serve a diverse range of strategies, ideologies and realities, from those imposed on them by their local, regional and national masters, to the demands of the theatre industry, theatre boards and, of course, theatre audiences. Moreover, Turnbull demonstrates how these demands are necessarily tied to the fluctuating political and economic circumstances at the time, and also to ever changing public attitudes towards the arts and their projected value. As such, the picture she paints is of regional theatres embroiled in perplexing bureaucratic systems, required to negotiate with multiple

bodies, and with whom the rules of engagement keep changing. Turnbull illustrates the absurd consequence of this: that funding, rather than being channelled into theatre-making itself, was increasingly used to hire the necessary expertise to ensure future monies were secured.

Building on this exposition of the precarious basis of arts subsidy, part two is devoted to the 1980s and 1990s where, Turnbull argues, systemic problems came to fruition. She outlines the impact of Margaret Thatcher's government that required the arts to be subject to market forces, where their 'worth could be discerned by their ability to earn their keep' (65). This, she claims, was particularly problematic for the regions, where 'four decades of state funding had ensured that the operations of Britain's regional theatres effectively revolved around subsidy' (69). The thrust of Turnbull's argument is, however, best demonstrated through her case studies of selected regional theatres in part three. Here, she evaluates in greater detail the impact of policy changes and the turbulence of public support for the arts, and persuasively explicates the build-up to and fallout from the crisis for particular regions and venues. Although she provides brief examples in parts one and two, it is here that the reader is given more contextualized evidence that takes account of the specificities of individual theatres.

Yet, although this section is illuminating, the scope of Turnbull's sample theatres is somewhat limited: her focus is noticeably on southern England, in particular the commuter belt, with a gesture towards the north through the inclusion of Liverpool and Harrogate. It would have been interesting to have had more accounts of theatres further from London, and to have perhaps considered in more depth the impact of devolution. Furthermore, although it is evident that Turnbull has utilized a diverse range of sources in

her research, including previous studies, surveys, government reports, Arts Council publications, media articles and archival documents, it would have been helpful if her archival and statistical sources were more fully referenced to assist future researchers.

Bringing Down the House is likely to prove useful for future research into both the mechanisms of the regional theatre industry and the political underwriting of public subvention funding in the arts. The fourth and final part of the book examines the impact of Tony Blair's New Labour government, a period of relative reprieve for regional theatre, although, as Turnbull notes, not unproblematically so. As the full implications of the New Labour administration and the current recession continue to emerge, analysis of arts funding will surely become increasingly pressing; for, as Turnbull warns and the December 2007 cuts signal, it is 'safe to say that the problems for the country's regional theatres are far from over' (220).

***Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* by Patrick Lonergan**

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In his study of the relationship between globalization and Irish theatre, Patrick Lonergan argues that the former 'complicates – and in some cases renders obsolete – many of the categories used to study dramatic literature and performance' (5). Globalization faces us with the tasks of defining concepts like 'nation' anew and finding relevant vocabularies of analysis. The study of Irish theatre, Lonergan suggests, provides a useful lens to seek out such definitions and vocabularies for three reasons: Ireland has been transformed by

globalization; historically, Irish theatre has functioned not just nationally, but internationally; and the globalization of Irish society has been contemporaneous with a revival in its theatre scene (23). There is a fourth possible reason for Lonergan's geographical focus; his evident expertise in and enthusiasm for the subject matter credits the choice of Ireland as much as the reasons cited above, making this book not just an excellent academic resource, but a thoroughly enjoyable read.

A similar sentiment is expressed by Kate Newey, one of the judges on the panel that granted Lonergan the Society of Theatre Research's prestigious Theatre Book Prize in April of this year. Speaking of the judges' choice, Newey recalls: 'Each of us recounted how we picked [the book] up, expecting difficult concepts, expressed in the highly technical language of economics and political theory, and with not much to speak to us as working theatre practitioners or scholars, only to find that each of us was gripped' (STR). *Theatre and Globalization* is the second book on Irish theatre to win the prize in recent years, following Christopher Morash's *A History of Irish Theatre 1601 – 2000* in 2002. It is not difficult to see parallels between the volumes. Morash's book, with its in-depth scholarship and informal tone was groundbreaking insofar as it opened up a discourse of Irish theatre history beyond the widely accepted 'Abbey' version, thus demythologising the Irish National Theatre Society and debunking the idea that the Irish stage was barren prior to the dramatic efforts of Yeats, Gregory and Synge. Lonergan expands our horizons further; he takes the discourse beyond the confines of history and dramatic writing, asking how Irish criticism can 'meaningfully address the works of writers whose reputation and reception are now strongly predetermined by global factors' (55) and reminding the reader of the limitations of 'attempting to use a nationalised

discourse to analyse work that has transcended national boundaries' (108). The study of milestone 'Irish' productions in their global contexts enables the reader to see the many aspects of theatre that can be overlooked when one fails to cast an eye beyond the local.

Theatre and Globalization merges economic and cultural concepts with the language of theatre criticism, ranging in its scope, as I will go on to discuss, from broad concepts of globalization, to innovative theatre theory, to engaging theatrical case studies. The section 'Defining Globalization' (17) in Chapter One offers a thought-provoking discussion on what the word globalization has come to mean and the phenomena it has been used to explain. Working with a loose conception of globalization as a 'paradigmatic shift from physical to conceptual space' (17), Lonergan draws on theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Malcolm Waters to suggest that while the world has been becoming globalized for centuries, globalization happens when people become aware of the shift from the physical to the conceptual, or the recession of geographical constraints, and begin to alter their behaviour accordingly. The scholarship of Goran Therborn is used to show that the catch-all of globalization encapsulates at least five distinct discourses. This clear and concise section would prove valuable not only for those interested in theatre, but for students and academics from a wide range of disciplines.

With regards to theatre theory, *Theatre and Globalization* offers new frameworks through which to analyse theatre in its global contexts. Particularly interesting is the discussion in Chapter Four of the ways in which globalization has altered the production and reception of many plays. Lonergan outlines five characteristics of theatre productions intended for international audiences, each of which sheds light on the mechanisms of the

global theatre industry. We are told, for example, that globalized theatre makes use of branding to manage risk (86). In this way, the reader is encouraged, as elsewhere in the book, to engage ‘more fully with the language of commerce and trade’ (219). There is a danger that this encouragement might be read as a denigration of theatre studies, that the arts are being asked to defer to the discourse of economics. However, *Theatre and Globalization* makes clear that the arts and the economy are in a reciprocal relationship; it is this reciprocity that makes it important for practitioners and scholars to understand the forces that both influence and are influenced by theatre. So while it might seem self-evident that the resurgence of theatre in Ireland was due in part to economic growth, Lonergan makes the less evident suggestion ‘that the performance of the Irish economy was influenced by the international profile of Irish drama’ (22). Of the five characteristics defined, the idea that globalized theatre inhibits intercultural exchange insofar as it reinforces national stereotypes for profit is also contentious (89). Again, this idea surfaces throughout the book, allowing us to reflect on the constructed notions of nationhood offered by an ostensibly creative industry that often privileges the exchange of capital over culture.

The analysis of influential ‘Irish’ theatre productions of the Celtic tiger era is one of this book’s strengths. There are informative and insightful discussions of quintessentially ‘Irish’ works such as Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Dion Boucicault’s *The Shaughraun*; the examination of The Abbey Theatre’s 1995 production of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, however, deals with the reception of difference, in terms of both multiculturalism and homosexuality, on the Irish stage. Lonergan’s interest in this regard lies in ‘the relationship between an audience that is dominated by one set of

cultural values and a performance that represents *other* cultural values' (129). The production, though critically successful, flopped, and this was seen by many as evidence of either Irish insularity or homophobia. While accepting both these explanations as factors, Lonergan argues that much was done to make the play accessible to Irish audiences (139) and also that *Angels in America* was performed 'during a period in which there was an alteration in representations of homosexuality in Irish culture – almost none of which provoked outright hostility, and many of which were popular' (152). He gives another possible reason for its box office failure: that the June performance of a play representing difference was not amenable to the national theatre's primary audience of that period, namely tourists (153). This emphasizes once more the effect of the global on seemingly local theatrical discourses, and points to the limitations of the nationalised techniques used for theatre research. Box office figures, newspaper reviews and interviews with practitioners all need to be understood in light of the commodification of theatre in terms of national brands.

In conclusion, *Theatre and Globalization* offers readers from diverse disciplines a means to sharpen up their understandings of globalization and to situate their own thought within the rhetoric covered by the umbrella term. Furthermore, in exhorting theatre scholars to expand their discourse beyond the national it instils sensitivity to global economic factors that can no longer be dismissed or ignored when thinking about contemporary theatre. Finally, in its use of apt case studies to illustrate and enliven this theoretical framework, *Theatre and Globalization* does what every good theatre production should – it entertains its audience, and leaves them asking questions.

Works Cited

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